Things that matter: Representing everyday technological things in comics

Dinnen, Zara

DOI:
10.1386/stic.3.2.313_1

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Dinnen, Z 2012, 'Things that matter: Representing everyday technological things in comics', *Studies in Comics*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 313-329. https://doi.org/10.1386/stic.3.2.313_1

Final article published as: "Representing everyday technological things in comics." *Studies in Comics*. 3. 2 (2012): 253-274 doi. http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/stic.3.2.313_1

This is the pre-publication version. Final article published as:

"Representing everyday technological things in comics." *Studies in Comics*. 3. 2 (2012): 253-274 doi. http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/stic.3.2.313_1

Things that matter: Representing everyday technological things in comics

Zara Dinnen, Birkbeck, University of London

Abstract

This article will consider the representation of the things that constitute our digital everyday in Danica Novgorodoff's *Refresh Refresh* in 2009, and comic strips commissioned by *The Guardian* for a series titled 'A cartoonist's view on the world we live in' (2012). It will study the work of drawing the digital: how do we depict computers and networks in graphic narratives? And what specific decisions and discourses are brought to bear through the affordances of image-text narratives? Taking an understanding of 'things' from Bill Brown's 'Thing theory', and Bruno Latour's 'From matters of fact to matters of concern', this article will argue that computers are elusive cultural objects that will always resist straightforward narrative, and that in representation, thinking of computers as things might proffer an expansive frame of reference. Using this assertion as a theoretical base it will offer a critical approach to graphic texts that are considered in their representation of the digital; suggesting that graphic narratives offer a particular set of representational tools for depicting the digital in all its complex thingliness.

Final article published as: "Representing everyday technological things in comics." *Studies in Comics*. 3. 2 (2012): 253-274 doi. http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/stic.3.2.313_1

Keywords

digital culture

contemporary comics

Thing Theory

computers

iconography

Refresh Refresh

Introduction: Drawing digital things in comics

In words we have generic names for the things that constitute our digital culture: computers, smart phones, laptops. When we conjure images of these things we recall specific versions, specific brands. This article will consider the conditions under which it is possible to image the digital: do artists need to depict specific laptops? What is the visual shorthand for depicting networks, or networked entities? The work of this article will be in thinking through some of the ways that graphic narratives productively implicate broader questions about representing the digital – as material artefact, social encounter, and cultural theory, and more particularly, as *things*. Taking an understanding of things from Bill Brown's essay 'Thing theory' (2001), and Bruno Latour's 'Why has critique run out of steam?: from matters of fact to matters of concern' (2004), this article argues that computers are elusive cultural objects that will always resist straightforward narrative, and that when studying the representation of computers in culture, thinking of computers as things might proffer an expansive frame of reference. Looking at Danica Novgorodoff's graphic novel *Refresh Refresh* (2009), and comic strips commissioned by

The Guardian for a series titled 'A cartoonist's view on the world we live in' (2012), it will suggest that graphic narratives offer a particular set of representational tools for depicting the digital in all its complex thingliness.

In an article for *The Guardian* published in 2011, critic and author Laura Miller considered the lack of contemporary fiction writing that reflects the role of the Internet and mobile network culture in society. Miller's argument frames her observation as a problem with the 'now-ness' of digital culture, suggesting that authors shy away from committing technology to fiction if the legacy of that technology is still unproven, with the potential to date. Miller writes:

> The Internet has altered our lives in ways television never did or could, but mainstream literary novelists – by which I mean writers who specialise in realistic, character-based narratives – have mostly shied away from writing about this, perhaps hoping that, like TV, it could be safely ignored. (2011)

In this article I will suggest that, beyond the fashion of the digital, it is the complexity of digital objecthood that presents problems for authors: how to represent objects that serve an expansive idea of connectedness, that are materially and figuratively more than the sum of the devices that mediate human computer interaction. This article will particularly focus on representations of the computer as a thing in the room, in graphic texts; not as the central subject of the narrative but instead as an object and agent that moves in and out of the frame. In this way the representation of digital technology in the graphic texts

considered, taps into the very tension between ubiquity and single-entity that Miller gestures at through her reference to TV. In pursuing this enquiry this article will first briefly define the critical context for the term 'things', particularly as distinct from 'objects', in relation to work by Brown and Latour. It will then consider the ways in which thinking about computers as things might be a useful framework through which to consider the task of drawing computers in narrative; before moving on to the central discussion of what computer-things do in *Refresh Refresh* and *The Guardian* strips, and how they articulate interesting, attentive readings of contemporary digital culture.

Defining things: Brown's 'Thing theory' and Latour's 'Matters of concern'

The touchstone of recent thing theory is Brown's essay of that name, first published as part of a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on 'Things', in Autumn 2001. Brown sets up the essay as a departure from Martin Heidegger's work in 'The Thing' (Heidegger 1971: 174-82), and as something distinct from cultural histories of objects – although both these fields of thought are carefully negotiated in the essay. For Brown, to work on the thing, and a theory of things, is to trace, and produce, a story of those things which exceed the status of objects, but are not fully procedural, or systematic; they retain mass and form but resist categorization and naming. Brown writes: 'The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation' (2001: 4). For Brown things are objects in tension; they exist always in relation – never as an independent entity. Brown asserts this state as not simply

one in which the object flexes in relation to the subject; rather that the object-as-thing has its own tension of being:

> Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, *the thing seems to name the object as it is even as it names something else*. (2001: 5, original emphasis)

For Brown, thinking about 'The thing' functions as a critical approach to the complex nature of objects. Brown considers thingness as something that unsettles the singularity of an object, and as a term that is useful for all it suggests about the limitations of the word 'object'. Throughout Brown's writing thingness is brought to our attention through representation. Brown's later monograph on the topic of things, *A Sense of Things* (2003), explicitly practices reading things in and through culture. He suggests that we are alerted to the thingness of *something* through attempts to depict particular objects as single entities, in an object's resistance to representation resides its thingness. This approach is particularly useful in the context of this article. As I will go on to suggest, in an ubiquitous digital culture it is, perhaps, through attempts to represent the digital that we are most acutely reminded of its complexity as a culture, and more particularly as a system of objects. By representing objects we do things to them – whether that is the

redundancy of the flattened sign, the signifying of an object's complexity through abstraction, or the sheer work of picturing the thingness of an object.

The critical unsettling produced by 'things' in Brown's writing, may stem from the very nature of the word 'thing'. In the *OED* the definition of thing is multiplex. 'Thing' as it pertains to an object, 'an entity of any kind', is the second set of definitions provided (*OED* 'thing n.1' 2.8). The first of set definitions derives from 'thing' as meaning 'a meeting, or the matter or business considered by it, and derived senses' (*OED* 'thing n.1' 1.1). Here thing is already a set of subject–object relations; referring to a matter and also the matter, of meeting – of a bringing together. In addition thing names an entity that has not been named, is misnamed or has become unnamed. Brown's thing theory provides a useful set of terms through which to think about things; it does not offer a new definition of things, rather it picks apart the elusive matters inherent in the etymology of the word. Thing is always naming what is not named – not only in the way we speak of a thing as that entity we have forgotten the name of – but also in that it refers to a set of relations that meet but do not cohere into anything more explicit than, 'a meeting, or the matter or business considered by it'. Brown's use of the terms 'latency' and 'excess' are proximate to a theory of meeting – wherein the event, or entity, is always both specific and dispersed.

Brown's dialectic is always-already of things. If Brown's terms enable us to think of things as objects-without-borders, or at least with fluctuating borders, the *OED* enables us to think of things as primarily a set, and secondarily a single-entity that pushes

against its own containment. In the essay, 'Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern' (2004), Latour rethinks his own writing on things, through the problematic of 'matters of fact'. He fine-tunes his earlier work that persistently destabilized facts, in deference to an articulation of 'matters of concern'. The more comprehensive term 'concern' is used in a similar way to Brown's 'things'; as a term that can encompass a not-all-at-onceness. Latour writes: 'Matters of fact are not all that is given in experience. Matters of fact are only very partial and, I would argue, very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only a subset of what could also be called states of affairs' (2004: 232). In Latour's argument matters of fact are objects that, in the critics' desperation not to passively consume, have become abstract in a way that is no longer productive; objects, in this light, that are no longer useful things to think with. Pursuing the logic outlined above, and manifest in the etymology of the word thing, Latour notes:

> We are now all aware that in all the European languages, including Russian, there is a strong connection between the words for thing and a quasi-judiciary assembly […] Now, is this not extraordinary that the banal term we use for designating what is out there, unquestionably, a thing, what lies out of any dispute, out of language, is also the oldest word we all have used to designate the oldest of the sites in which our ancestors did their dealing and tried to settle their disputes? (2004: 232–33)

Latour goes on to concede the thing as 'gathering'. Not that which is beyond discussion, or meeting, but the knot of relations of discussion and meeting. The thing-as-gathering, and the thing as the latency and excess of object-ness, are useful models to consider not only the matter of complex objects (such as computers) but also, as in Brown's work, the way these objects become things through representation.

Computing things: The objects of digital culture

The subject of this article is the representation of computers in graphic narratives, particularly within a genre and aesthetic of the everyday; familiar and familial domestic tableaus. This article suggests that computers, as networked devices, as media and meditational, are objects that can also be accurately described as things. This is not to ignore the matter and materiality of computers – the plastic, hardware, circuitry and labour – rather it is to suggest that these elements can be considered alongside notions of virtuality, and connectedness, within Brown and Latour's frameworks of thingness. This article makes use of the way a drawn computer might become a thing, through representation. This latter point is one of concern for anyone interested in representations of digital culture. The ambiguity of the term 'computer' denotes thingness, but this will always be in tension with matters of specificity: Which computer? Which brand? Which operating system? Which Internet service provider? The distinct operational processes and look of different hardware and software brands complexly matters in terms of narrative and representation. In her 1995 study, *Life on the Screen* (1997), Sherry Turkle traced a history of the difference between Windows (and earlier similar models such as the IBM PCs) and Mac systems and the distinct types of user they instantiate. Whereas

IBM and Microsoft enabled users to access backdoor processes, increasingly versions of Mac devices were closing off access, black-boxing their programming and hardware. Turkle noted: 'The contrast between the IBM PC and the Macintosh made it clear that there was no single computer and no single computer culture; the triumph of the Macintosh simulation aesthetic is part of a larger cultural shift in the meaning of transparency' (1997: 42). For Turkle the Macintosh was fully emblematic of a postmodern culture that privileges surface and the suppression of the mechanics of technologies of culture and state. Turkle argued that in this sense computers may have become 'objects-to-think-with'; not only physical objects but also cultural objects that help to cohere postmodern ideologies through material example (1997: 44–45). And yet, as many media theorists since Turkle have argued, these objects-to-think-with are not ephemeral, conceptual models; they are concrete, built objects that may disguise but persistently make tangible real economic, social and physical networks – in the form of cables and code, global economics and social exchange (see Doueihi 2011; Galloway 2004; Fuller 2003; Hayles 2002; Kirschenbaum 2008; Manovich 2001). Computers, then, might be less conceptual objects-to-think-with, than they are 'semiotic-material' things-to-think-with[1]: objects that are in excess and latency of their physical presence, a gathering of material and figurative structures.

It is striking that Brown's description of thingness holds such a strong correlation with the difficulty of figuring the digital. The digital is always seemingly more than the sum of its parts – offering connection and virtuality as experiential modes – whilst being resolutely not more than its material composition – virtuality is not a felt

experience, it is a projected and imagined one that is materially contingent. Here Jane Bennett's work on thing-power is particularly useful. Bennett describes things as always networked, always connected, she does so to destabilize subject–object binaries, but in doing so describes a model emblematic for thinking about digital culture. Bennett writes: 'This is not a world, in the first instance, of subjects and objects, but of various materialities constantly engaged in a network of relations' (2004: 354). This active, animate discourse describes not only the literal figure of the network, as it materializes in cable and code, but also the complexity of representing digital culture as an itemized system. When writing about the digital (often paradoxically on and through the digital) critics, theorists and creative writers partake in manufacturing a kind of oscillating proximity: words take us closer to describing the digital but also obscure the procedural logic of its machinic functions. This is exemplified in Turkle's work on computers. In between case studies of computer-users, she uses the PC as a conceptual modelling tool – skipping between the specific and the figurative. In her formulation 'objects-to-think-with', the computer is held in contention as subject–object. This critical position seems to broadly echo Brown's dialectic and Latour's particular openness; and suggests that thing-thinking might be a productive area of research to consider alongside critical work on the digital.

It is not a coincidence that Brown's work on thing theory emerges in a moment of digital culture. For Brown it is the emergence of new media that necessitates a thinking of things. Brown writes that, '[n]ew media […] newly mediates the relation between people and objects, [it] precipitates distance *and* proximity' (2001: 16). In some respects

Brown uses computers as-objects-to-think-with; only through a reflexive framework. Digital media recasts subject-object relations, demanding renewed attention to an understanding of objects, one that unsettles historical suppositions, and inserts a careful ambiguity – thingness. Any critical apprehension of new media – and of the way it may reconfigure subject–object relations – relies on systems of representation to articulate what is not visible. This is in part the matter, and the why it matters, of thing theory. Digital computing is a representational model that demands considered representation in culture – the graphic narratives that are discussed in the following passages are just one example of representations of digital culture that seem aware of the complexity of that task. That said, the graphic narrative does offer a particularly distinct framework for grappling with the representation of digital things: not only must it describe and connote, but it must visualize the thingness of objects that are rarely simply objects. Drawing the digital – particularly drawing the objects that mediate and substantiate our everyday encounters with the digital (desktop PCs, netbooks or notebooks, e-readers and smart phones) – is a practice of drawing the thingness of those digital things that are always as much as and more than their all-at-once-ness. In Novgorodoff's *Refresh Refresh* the desktop computer is an object, a coherent symbol, but it is also a thing – always performing in excess or anticipation of its networked entity.

Clicking things: 'Refresh' and the desire for communication

Novgorodoff's *Refresh Refresh* is an adaptation of a short story by American author Benjamin Percy. Novgorodoff's version clearly plays on the representation of the household PC, or more accurately of e-mail, established in Percy's short story, and so it is

worth briefly discussing the story here. Percy's 'Refresh Refresh' (2005) is set in the small desert town of Tumalo, Oregon; where teenage boys anxiously await news of their fathers, soldiers lately posted to Iraq. The boys fight and drink and act out roles of masculinity in a space suddenly bereft of men. The 'Refresh, Refresh' of the title is the song of the boys at their computers, clicking refresh on the web pages of their e-mail accounts, hoping the next reload brings one new message, an e-mail from their missing dads:

> Sometimes, on the computer, I would hit refresh, refresh, *refresh*, hoping. In October I received an e-mail that read: 'Hi Josh. I'm OK. Don't worry. Do your homework. Love, Dad'. I printed it up and hung it on my door with a piece of Scotch tape. [Emphasis in original] (Percy 2008: 8)

The instance of the boys at their screens is not a central part of the story, occurring only twice and mostly dwarfed by the physical, often violent encounters that are the main subject of the narrative. And yet, the phrase is the title of the story – and of a collection of Percy's stories published in 2008. The image of the boys clicking refresh – 'We could only cross our fingers and wish on stars and hit refresh, *refresh*, hoping they would return to us' [Emphasis in original] (Percy 2008: 10) – is drawn out for the reader through the title; it is de facto emblematic, made to mean something in a story that might otherwise privilege its representation of physical social encounter over the more prosaic figure of the household PC, and the body who sits with it.

Almost as if in response to Miller's complaint, in Percy's story technology is not only represented but it is represented in its ubiquity. The landscape of the story is deserted in various ways: it is rural, desert terrain; has been vacated by its men; the seasons are harsh and blank – the central action takes place during an icy, white winter. The narrative follows three teenage boys who seem isolated, barely tethered to family and wider community. Rather than write this bleak, minimal landscape apart from the conspicuous contemporary reality of e-mail and instant digital communication, Percy implicates digital culture in the topography of the setting; and then empties it – the boys click refresh because there are no messages.

The graphic novel *Refresh Refresh* by Novgorodoff, published by First Second in 2009, is based on a screenplay that was adapted from the short story by James Ponsoldt. The narrative of the adaptation closely follows Percy's story; expanded for longer form media. In Novgorodoff's version the phrase 'refresh, refresh' becomes panels depicting laptops, and the boys front lit by the back light of their monitors. These panels are always in dialogue with those around them; as in the story the encounter with e-mail is framed by its 'everyday-ness' but in the graphic novel the strength of the visual relationships between panels more emphatically articulates this. The 'refresh, refresh' of Percy's story is short hand for an encounter with the digital that is familiar: us, sat in front of our screens, talking to them, clicking at them, willing them to show us things we want to read or see. Novogorodoff's depiction of this same encounter begins to pick it apart; representing the various material ways that such an encounter is structured; raising questions of how this encounter can be shown rather than gestured at. The necessity to

draw the monitor, to place the computer and the screen firmly within the graphic narrative, introduces a more critical representation of the technology; Novgorodoff includes logos and windows, and introduces some of the various corporate and named frames that mediate actual encounters with digital technology.

The structure of the graphic novel is broken into small chapters. The book begins by introducing the setting and depicting families sending their fathers off to war. The next three chapters each describe the home lives of the three boys as they are left. The first sequence depicts Josh who is left to live with his grandfather: they eat a television dinner and watch the news, streams of speech emulate from the television describing the situation in Iraq. Josh gets up to get some ice cream; on his way back he passes his laptop. His e-mail page is open, a Yahoo! e-mail account, he has no messages. Novgorodoff shows the ‘refresh, refresh’ not through those words but by drawing a pointer arrow, hovering over the refresh button, with two sound bubbles breaking the image: ‘click’, ‘click’. The sequence of panels shows him giving his grandfather the ice cream then returning to the laptop; he clicks again, and he has ‘1 New Message’ from his dad. The scene places the laptop fully immersed in the context of a domestic tableau; it is a visual, touchable, audible object. It is clear that Novgorodoff has had to make decisions about how to incorporate the laptop into her visual language. There is an instant critical aspect to reading *Refresh Refresh* as the hand drawn narrative estranges the glossy shapes of PCs and laptops, particularly the unnatural light and hue of a computer monitor.

[INSERT FIG. 1]

In text the words ‘computer’ or ‘Internet’, ‘online’ and ‘offline’, can do much work in placing digital machines and networks in the narrative with very little critical apprehension of what those words connote. In a graphic novel there is more demand made on authors and artists who attempt to represent such technology, or technological terms. They have to consider what these named things are. In drawing a computer we draw a specific computer, one that will suggest a particular brand or icon. Throughout the novel Novgorodoff details brand names and logos in her own hand, immersing these emblems in the whole text. Most notably a drawing of a camcorder that opens a section where the boys are filming themselves fight – on the side of the otherwise anonymous image are the letters ‘SONY’ (Novgorodoff 2009: 23). The image is arresting, the brand icon is naturalized in the narrative but made strange through its transposition from ubiquitous corporate logo to a four-letter word. In the early panel sequences the casing of the laptop itself is drawn ambiguously, it is identifiable as a laptop but there are no particular details. The monitor is drawn displaying windows and it is possible to discern the layout as that of a Mac desktop; as noted the e-mail provider is Yahoo!. The object of the computer recedes to foreground the interface. Novgorodoff’s drawing style is sketchy but complete, both in her lines and in her scene-setting. The figure of the laptop moves in and out of the panel frames in a way that keeps it in the corner of the reader’s eye – it is always in the room, persistently present. The details of the screen are shown to a greater or lesser degree depending on how present the laptop is in the narrative. There are various panels depicting laptops throughout the novel and these seem connected with those depicting TVs, camcorders, jukeboxes, arcade video games: they all necessitate the artist’s consideration of what details are relevant.

It is worth noting the indifference to brands and corporate service providers that Novgorodoff's representation produces; and how this may reflect a generic convention. In a 1985 research paper titled '7-up art, pepsi art, and sunkist art', Associate Professor in Marketing at University of Connecticut, Dr Susan Spiggle analysed the representation of brand names and logos in underground comix of the early 1970s and early 1980s. The categories that Spiggle used were based around the various ways brand symbols are contextualized – as satirical, fictitious, disguised, generic; as prominent, hidden or consumed; as derided or desired. From her research Spiggle surmized: '[…] underground comix artists draw humorously named fictitious brands and satirically disguised brands as background features of panels. They show characters in settings with real brands as background features or as objects of characters' attentions to ground their strips in everyday reality' (Spiggle 1985: n.p.). Overall Spiggle's research is a little ambiguous – her statistics do not overwhelmingly support received notions of underground artistic practices as inherently counter-cultures, satirical by nature; but neither does it suggest this is a misapprehension. Usefully though it places Novgorodoff's approach within a genealogy of concern: the use of distinct brands to mark for the reader the proximity of fiction and reality. In *Refresh Refresh* Novgorodoff articulates this proximity through and in relation to technology. Her depictions of brands, and of machines, are treated as simply more thingly matter in the room – more furniture. This is not a reductive move; rather it shows up some of the material and conceptual ways that as users, and readers, we narrativize technological encounters. In this move it makes objects things. The representation of these items is a drawing of attention to all the complex ways they fail to

be fully represented as objects, to the concepts and matter that are gathered in the generic icon of a computer.

About two thirds of the way through *Refresh Refresh* is a short sequence of panels which begins with drawings of a bleak snowy landscape, a plane trailing overhead; a fawn is shown rummaging through the snow and leaves. The next panel is a cut – the light screen of Josh’s empty inbox a panel on its own without the other box of a laptop; and then a zoom out to Josh sat in front of the glow of the screen, shown by Novgorodoff as a dark bordered rectangle of white-blue. The colours of the snowy landscape are closely connected to the colours of the screen: cold and wintry and vacant. The fawn is a strip of warm browns and reds in the panels depicting the landscape; these warm colours are echoed in the panel depicting Josh in front of the screen – the room is bathed in a yellow light. In this sequence of panels Novgorodoff seems to draw connections between the vastness of the landscape and the vastness of the laptop monitor – the interface to another kind of dispersed landscape. The fawn, Josh himself, the electric light of the living room: these things are warm in contrast to the wilderness and the digital representation of distance (Josh’s empty inbox). There is in Novgorodoff’s visual language, and in the colourist Hilary Sycamore’s careful design, a subtle but arresting system of representation wherein digital technology (the figure of the laptop) is complicatedly framed in relation to bodies, environment, and narrative. The laptop in this story is a point of ambiguous, faulty connection – vague and white like the wintry forest – but it is also a specific, articulated presence – an object in the room, with global companies designing correspondence, and cables and plastic and other physical matter

always attached. In this way the laptop is both a thing in its 'all-at-onceness' and some-thing-else in excess of that: the latency of communication as it materializes, and the anticipation that remains when it fails to do so.

[INSERT FIG. 2]

Stripping things: Comic strips and the digital as mundane

Whilst Miller's concerns for literature in the age of digital computing carry weight in the field of literary fiction, comics and graphic narratives are perhaps more equipped to incorporate computing into the everyday landscape of their subjects. Literary fiction has to name things in the room, and so can easily ignore the desktop that haunts most living rooms, the smart phone that is never very far away from someone's grasp – if they are not relevant it can neglect to name them. As suggested in the reading of *Refresh Refresh*, graphic narratives can draw these things as background, in a way that adds to, but does not direct, the text. *The Guardian* recently ran a series titled 'Cartoonists on the world we live in'. Featuring comic strips published online the series encouraged comic artists to envisage everyday scenarios. The format (one page strips) did not enable the sophisticated placing of the computer over time, as represented in *Refresh Refresh*, but it did pointedly challenge cartoonists to depict a contemporary everyday; several rose to this challenge by including encounters with the digital in their work.

In his *The Guardian* series, comics artist Stephen Collins strips a day-in-the-life of social media. In Collins' 'Likeness' computer things are primarily networked and secondarily objectified. The opening out of the containing material structures of the digital staves off whimsy, in favour of a kind of palimpsest of ways of representing the

digital as sketch-able thing. That is to say, rather than depict devices, Collins attempts to draw just the interface, and particularly the way interfaces mediate self-presentation.

Collins' comic is structured around the cycle of a daily routine; moreover it is about the ways in which '[e]veryday, when [we] wake up […] [we] know exactly who [we'll] be' (2012). It is left unclear whether the strip depicts the actual passing of time or a projection of a daily routine – the end of the comic is a return to the beginning, the protagonist in bed at 7.30 a.m.. The loop becomes irrelevant as the narrative develops and the reader is shown some of the ways we externalize 'character' in the era of digital social networking. In Collins' strip computers are entities but primarily they are things that enable more things. The protagonist defines himself by his archetypal *The Guardian* reader-ness (this is not made explicit rather a seemingly obvious point of reference given the publication). He is shown sitting at a desk, hand on mouse, laptop open; the caption, 'I like the films of Woody Allen […] I like the music of Marvin Gaye'. A few panels on and the panel border disappears, instead the caption 'I like to interact […] I like to choose' tops and tails a series of boxes: 'Are you sad about Syria / Yes / No' – a pointer arrow hovers over the 'Yes'. The next panel has a representation of the Facebook thumbs-up icon and the 'Like' tag, inserted into the caption 'I like to ["like"] the opinions liked by all my like-minded friends'. Across this series of panels the frame of the laptop monitor disappears in favour of representing the content iconography. Rather than this being a loss of attention to the detail of the digital it represents a shifting of emphasis from the digital as the desktop or handheld encounter, to the digital as a set of coded, networked relations. The thingness of the digital appears in this series of panels not as the

computer that is more than the sum of its single-entity, but instead as a set of relations that meet: technological and cultural procedures, effect, and a resulting excess – the derived sense of personality that surfaces in the captions. This is a gathering and a gathering together of things. In Collins' strip choosing to like something on Facebook is a thing – 'a meeting' and the business conducted by it; the drawing of this act can be viewed as representing the thingness in such an encounter.

In British comic artist Luke Pearson's entry for the series, the reader encounters a couple living with and amongst networked technology – much like *Refresh Refresh*, Pearson depicts a recognizable domestic tableau (2012). The couple move through their daily chores passively consuming news about international war zones. In the first and second panels the man lies in bed reading the news on his smart phone. The third panel is the phone itself, displaying the page he was reading; the shape of the phone is the panel frame. A few panels on and his partner, or wife, calls to him, distracting him from the task of reading the news; this is represented as plain text in the next panel – from phone, to text, back to the domestic scene. The passive relation to technology is represented as one of not apprehending, of not paying attention. Pearson is perhaps drawing a connection between this passivity and the couple's not-seeing of a homeless man who sleeps outside the supermarket they frequent. In the strip digital devices are networked devices; they 'talk' to, and attempt to engage, the couple. Pearson depicts the streaming of news and data as an encounter that merges with the imagination of the everyday. A panel depicting the woman at the sink, washing dishes, moves into a hybrid scene, as her background becomes the war zone described in the news report she is listening to. The

panel edges throughout the strip are straight lines (apart from the one frame shaped like the phone) but in this panel – of the war and the sink – they are wavy; there is a loosening of the frame suggestive of a cinematic dissolve. In this representation is a pervasive porousness. Pearson bleeds together images of the domestic and the global, the inside and outside. The porousness is facilitated by the figure of technology.

The iconography of this technology is less articulated than Novgorodoff's in *Refresh Refresh*. The news display on the phone might recall the BBC news app to those familiar with it but it is not an explicit naming in the way that Yahoo! features in *Refresh Refresh*. That said the smart phone itself looks like an iPhone, it features the distinctive square-in-a-circle control button that is exclusive to the Apple product. In Pearson's strip computers and digital devices are emphatically objects, drawn in amongst lamps, furniture, potted plants and dishes. But they are also narrative – as standalone panels, containing information. In excess of this they are media: that is *things* that communicate. In the instance of the dishwashing panel they alter subject–object relations, reconfiguring the formal contingencies of the domestic scene. Technology as distraction is represented as latent: the characters never directly address their consumption of media. Rather they look past, walk past and stand in the foreground of their devices and the data which their devices stream. With regards Pearson's strip, describing digital devices as objects would be to limit the way he represents their complexity; instead they are things, exceeding, connecting and gathering strands of narrative and communication.

Conclusion: Gathering things

Final article published as: “Representing everyday technological things in comics.” *Studies in Comics*. 3. 2 (2012): 253-274 doi. http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/stic.3.2.313_1

Contemporary culture is one marked by its digital things. It is a culture full of objects that manifest digital networks and that mediate social interaction, inscribe literature and visual culture, and parse information. Representing the contemporary in its everyday-ness necessitates representing the digital. This article has argued that in the particular instance of household computing devices – PCs and smartphones – it is the thingness of these devices, rather than their physical form as objects, that demands attention. Thinking of computers as things enables an artistic and critical approach that gathers together disparate concerns: the materiality of digital culture, the corporate branding and protocols of that culture, personal interaction with devices and networks. This approach considers computers dialectically, present in their all-at-onceness and in latency and excess of their simultaneity. The graphic narratives considered in this article articulate a digital literacy that is able to grapple with the elliptical and visible aspects of digital culture. They do so by gathering relations between the digital and the physical environment within systems of representation – visual languages – that flex and stretch, able to hold such complexity. In their representation of the digital as object, narrative and an excess of these, they draw the digital as thing. In doing so they perhaps suggest that thingness itself may be a productive term through which to approach a broader analysis of digital culture.

References

Bennett, J. (2004), ‘The force of things: Steps toward an ecology of matter’, *Political Theory*, 32, pp. 347–72.

Brown, B. (2001), ‘Thing theory’, *Critical Inquiry*, 28:1, pp. 1–22.

____ (2003), *A Sense of Things*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.

Collins, S. (2012), ‘Cartoonists on the world we live in’, *The Guardian*, 20 July, http://www.guardian.co.uk. Accessed 25 July 2012.

Doueihi, M. (2011), *Digital Cultures*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Galloway, A. R. (2004), *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Fuller, M. (2003), *Behind the Blip: Essays on the Culture of Software*, New York: Autonomedia.

Hayles, N. K. (2002), *Writing Machines*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Heidegger, M. (1971), ‘The Thing’, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper and Row, pp. 174-82.

Kirschenbaum, M. G. (2008), *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Latour, B. (2004), ‘Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern’, *Critical Inquiry*, 30:2, pp. 225–48.

Malewitz, R. (2012), ‘Regeneration through misuse: Rugged consumerism in contemporary American culture, *Publication of Modern Language Association*, 127:3, pp. 526–41.

Manovich, L. (2001), *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Miller, L. (2011), ‘How novels came to terms with the Internet’, *The Guardian*, 15 January, http://guardian.co.uk. Accessed 15 April 2012.

Novgorodoff, D. (2009), ‘Danica Novgorodoff talks “Refresh Refresh”: Interview with Alex Dueben’, Comic Book Resources, 25 September, http://www.comicbookresources.com. Accessed 25 July 2012.

Novgorodoff, D., Percy, B., Ponsoldt, J. and Sycamore, H. (2009), *Refresh Refresh*, New York and London: First Second.

Pearson, L. (2012), ‘Cartoonists on the world we live in’, *The Guardian*, 20 July, http://www.guardian.co.uk. Accessed 25 July 2012.

Percy, B. (2005), 'Refresh, Refresh', *The Paris Review*, 175:Fall/Winter, n.p., http://www.theparisreview.org. Accessed 8 November 2012.

____ (2008), *Refresh, Refresh*, London: Jonathan Cape, pp. 3–20.

Plotz, J. (2005), 'Can the sofa speak? A look at thing theory', *Criticism*, 47:1, pp. 109–18.

Spiggle, S. (1985), '7-up art, pepsi art, and sunkist art: The presentation of brand symbols in art', *Advances in Consumer Research*, 12, n.p. http://www.acrwebsite.org. Accessed 25 July 2012.

OED (2012), 'thing, n.1', Online, June, http://oed.com/view/Entry/200786?rskey=zdlOyO&result=1&isAdvanced=false. Accessed 25 July 2012.

Turkle, S. (1997), *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York: Touchstone.

Tuters, M. and Varnelis, K. (2006), 'Beyond locative media: Giving shape to the Internet of things', *Leonardo*, 39:4, pp. 357–63.

Contributor details

Zara has recently submitted her Ph.D. on representations of the digital in contemporary American culture to the department of English and Humanities, Birkbeck, University of London. She is a visiting lecturer at the University of Roehampton, and Associate Tutor at Birkbeck. She has articles and reviews published or forthcoming in *Journal of Narrative Theory, ImageText, Journal of American Studies and Textual Practice*. Zara is co-convener of the Contemporary Fiction Seminar at the Institute of English Studies.

E-mail:

zara.dinnen@gmail.com

Note

[1] 'Semiotic-material' is taken from N. Katherine Hayles' *Writing Machines* (2002: 22). Hayles uses this formulation to denote the way computers are computational machines that trigger real-word (perhaps real time, to think about Brown's reflections on things and

temporality) effects; thus they are both semiotic and material, at once. This formulation broadly fits with the characteristics of thingness outlined by Brown – the dialectical potential of simultaneity and excess/latency.